

STRANGE HIGHWAYS



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CHAPTER THE FIRST

It was in the mid-eighties that the world went to shit in a handcart.

Before that, things had been moving along okay, for the most part . . . then the Great Conflict happened. Things got real bad real quick; didn't matter if you lived in Montana or Mozambique. A whole lotta people died and a whole lotta maps got rearranged.

The folks who survived, well, many of 'em wound up wishin' they hadn't.

Let's take *this* sorry sonofabitch for example . . .

See him dangling there, full o' holes, bruises, broken bones . . . beat on, pissed on, shit on, stabbed, shot, hung by a rope off this here trellis bridge and left for dead?

"Nobody deserves that kind o' brutalizin'!" you might say. "No matter what he done. That there's overkill!"

Yeah, well, not in Texas.

After the Great Conflict, Texas finally got what it always aimed for: to be a real lone star.

The rest o' the world didn't want nothin' more to do with it. Hell, even the Mexicans got fed up. They all got together and built up the biggest, thickest wall you've ever seen.

Yessir, the Big T's a wasteland. Cut off from anything resemblin' civilization. And as far as the law goes . . . there's really only one law. The oldest one o' all: survival o' the fittest.

Thirty-five miles west of our lonesome hanged fella, just off the Anaconda—the main highway that cuts across the state—that endless, timeless struggle o' life and death is playing out under the bakin' sun.

What happened is, a desperate crow thought he'd make himself a meal o' a rattlesnake. Now crows ain't the smartest birds on their best day, but if you was to tell me this crow was especially feeble-minded to pick a fight with a rattler, I'd be inclined to agree.

What the crow mighta lacked in smarts though, he made up for in sheer cussedness. He ain't givin' up this fight, diggin' his talons into those scaly diamonds, a rippin' and a tearin' with that sharp beak . . . but I think you and I both know how this particular drama plays out: That's right, you don't pick a fight with a rattler. Once he sinks those teeth in—like he did just now—it ain't but a matter o' time 'til the fat lady sings.

That snake coils 'round those black feathers, emptyin' his venom. The crow lets out one strangled cry and then goes dead still. Right about now the fat lady is wailin' her ass off.

The snake, he don't pay no mind to the sound o' truck motors out on the Anaconda, don't pay much heed to the nails-on-chalkboard squeal o' brakes engaging. In the predatory world, rattlers don't pay no mind to anacondas anyhow, no sir.

But, as weather-worn boots crunch against the desert gravel, that rattlesnake senses somethin' awful comin' his way—somethin' meaner, smarter, and a whole lot deadlier than him. So he skedaddles, leaving a windin' trail in the dirt, well and gone by the time a tall, lean shadow falls over the stiffened blackbird.

After some heavier steps, that first shadow's joined by another—but this'd be about the strangest set o' shadows you've ever seen. That'd be on account o'em belonging to the Magi twins, Bo and Tweeny. They're what's called “conjoined,” you see, so they make for quite a sight; Tweeny, she's the big one, holdin' her little brother—and I mean little in the literal sense o' the word, since they was born at the same time—like one o' them ventrily-quists holds a dummy. 'Cept a ventrily-quist and his dummy ain't o' course stuck together at the head.

The twins, they just had to come and see the handiwork of the Ringmaster. He'd be the one that the tall, lean shadow belongs to . . . dressed just as smartly as ever in his tux and top hat, monocle over one eye, carryin' a silver-tipped, dragon-headed cane. The Ringmaster goes by different names at different times, like the Ramblin' Man and Ledger DeMesne. Whatever name he goes by, though, you can bet it gets spoke on tremblin' lips, 'cause the Ringmaster ain't one to be trifled with.

While the Magi twins watch, fascinated, ol' Ledger DeMesne sets his cane to one side, where it keeps on standin' all by itself, and he bends down and picks up that crow, all gentle-like. He brings it close and whispers words that most folks forgot by the time that big pyramid was built in Giza. Then he puts his lips real close to the bird's beak and he blows . . .

And, see that? Those shiny black eyes just popped right open! The Ringmaster tilts his head up, throws his arms out, and lets that mangled bird fly, and damned if those wings don't flap. It don't fly right, not at first, jiggin' and jaggin' like a drunk leavin' a saloon after last call, but pretty soon it evens out, lets off a ragged squawk, and gets goin' with a purpose.

“Where's it headed?” Tweeny asks.

“East, dummy,” says Bo.

“How far?” asks Tweeny.



Bo grins. “Bout thirty-five miles . . . as the dead crow flies.”

Bo falls into one helluva fit o’ gigglin’ and guffawin’ as the Ramblin’ Man rambles his way back to the trucks.

A while later back at the trestle bridge, the damndest thing happens: That hangin’ corpse, well his hand gets to twitchin’, followed pretty soon by his legs. Next thing you know he goes and opens up his eyes! You might think you seen some mind-bogglin’ spectacles in your life, but until you’ve witnessed a hanged man climb hand-over-hand up his own rope, you ain’t seen shit.

Our friend here, he ain’t exactly no ordinary man, as you mighta surmised by now. His name’s Jo Jo and he’s what you’d call “different”—it’s why he ain’t dead, for one thing. It’s also why he joined the Ramblin’ Man’s Barnstormers all those years ago. But we’ll get to that later. Right now, Jo Jo has made it onto the bridge—takin’ his time undoin’ that noose but presently his persistence pays off. He tosses the rope aside and goes stumblin’ west across the rails until he steps offa them tracks, relieved to feel solid ground under his boots. Eyes closed against the sun, his mind drifts back momentarily to the shootin’ and the beatin’, and he knows it’s gonna be quite a spell ’til he feels anywhere close to normal once again, but mostly what he thinks about . . . is Her.

I gotta get back to Her.

He rubs his chest, plucks a lead slug or two off his hide, and casts his gaze west, where the rails continue on as far as he can see. But curvin’ ’round the edge of the chasm he just crawled out of, sweepin’ in and runnin’ next to them train tracks, is the two-lane Anaconda. It’s there that Jo Jo conducts himself next, eyeballin’ a peculiar object just this side o’ the blacktop.

Now, of all the shit-ass fortune Jo Jo’s undergone in the last twenty-four hours, one tiny iota o’ good luck has smiled on him: There ain’t been but the slightest breeze overnight and Jo Jo’s dusty, bullet-holed, beat-up cowboy hat is still sittin’ right there next to the highway.

It’s a small comfort, a man’s hat, but at least it’s one thing they didn’t manage to take from him. That and the silver trinkets he wears.

In fact . . .

Jo Jo reaches into his jeans pocket and takes out his wallet, openin’ it up to see . . . his money, his Johnnies, right where they’re supposed to be. His picture o’ Her, however, is missin’. They didn’t wanna rob him, no sir, that ass whoopin’ and killin’ (or attempted killin’, as it turns out) was some straight-up vindictive shit; but they did steal from him that image o’ Her. And that alone’s enough to make the bastards pay.

Jo Jo stands there, lookin’ at the tracks in the dirt where the trucks pulled over. He bends down, scoops up some o’ the earth in his hand, and sniffs. He knows where they’re goin’. The Barnstormers run the same route, year after year. Ain’t no way

he can get to Hubtown before they’ve been and gone, but after that . . . Dead End, well he reckons he can catch up to ’em at Dead End. And it’s there that he’ll get Her back . . . and settle up with Ledger DeMesne once and for all.

Jo Jo tosses the dirt aside, pulls that cowboy hat down to block out the sun, and bends his steps to the west, along the Anaconda, so preoccupied with his own ruminations that he don’t notice the scraggly crow that swoops in for a clumsy landin’ on the road behind him, its feathers pointin’ this way and that, lookin’ for all the world like somethin’ that done got chewed up and shit out.

Jo Jo’s boots carry him on while the Ramblin’ Man watches through the blackbird’s dead eyes.

